



WATER HAS EARS
SHAHRIAR MONDANIPOUR

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“Absolutely not, under no circumstances will I make Wiko’s house another home for myself.”

It was with this sentence that during my first two or three months in Berlin, I constantly reminded myself of a fear.

For me, Wiko started with a lake.

My apartment's balcony overlooks a lake that in my fictional imaginings whispers at night, and I do not understand its German language. I have intentionally given it a sentimental name, the Whispering Lake. The good thing about this name is that it does not allow smart yet unimaginative people entry to the lake. Not even fishermen. In the last story I wrote about this body of water, for four days, every day, the narrator goes to see a stubborn fisherman who from early in the morning scratches the skin and flesh of the lake with his fishhook. And to dissuade the fisherman, every day the narrator tells him a tale.

“Sir! This lake has no fish.”

“Sir! Industrial sewage waste has leaked into the lake and the fish are either all dead or toxic ...”

Day three:

“Sir, I lied to you about the industrial sewage waste. But it is best that you not fish here. Once upon a time, I knew someone who had planned to blow himself up among the tourists around the “Der Rufer” statue. He did not succeed. Instead, he went to the middle of this lake and blew himself up. Water and dead fish splashed out as far as the sidewalk on the far side of the street. TNT toxins are still in the water. The fish here are the fetuses of death.”

And on the fourth day, he says:

“I lied to you about the suicide bombing. Once upon a time, my best friend went to the middle of this lake and slashed his wrists. The fish have drunk his blood. I cannot allow anyone to toss my friend's blood into a frying pan.”

And the old man, who bears no resemblance to the old man of the *Old Man and the Sea*, replies that he never did and never will believe these naïve stories. And while casting his fishing line, he asks why the man is so afraid of anyone fishing in that lake. The narrator does not answer.

“But I will not tell him that there have been nights when I have whispered a name I once loved very much to this patience-stone lake. Water has ears; then the stupid fish, too, have memorized that name. It is a pity to ...”

It was not easy. It was harder than hard to leave my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was my third home since I left Iran and became another so-called immigrant writer or exile. I knew I was tired of again starting a new life in a new town, of little by little buying furniture – a sofa to sit and sleep on, a bookshelf for old and new books, a plant, a painting – and of again choosing a corner as a nest for my writing. And of growing fond of all these, for nine months or a few years. And then, again, the heartache of having to tear my

heart away from this home ... But my simple crime is not the gift of bright and dark fire to mankind, it is only and only a few stories.

I have again returned to Berlin. Wiko has arranged a beautiful apartment for me. Seeing it makes me miss my home in Iran, which I left for presumably nine months, but I have now suffered being away from it for seven years.

“No, not this time. I should not make another home at Wiko. I will not give my heart to any of the beauties this place has. I will remain a stranger until I have to again pack my stories, suitcases, and books and go to some unknown place somewhere in the world.”

My great hope is that Wiko might be able to get a visa for my daughter to come to Germany, so that we can see each other after seven years. During these years, four times her applications through US embassies and consulates in Istanbul, Ankara, and Dubai have resulted in a “no”. They did not even give any weight to Harvard University’s acceptance letter for her to attend a three-month fellowship.

Still, there are complications that we Iranians are familiar with and tolerant of at embassies. Friends at Wiko tell me, “No matter how, we will bring your daughter to Berlin.” And I tell all of this to the lake.

... The scene of a father and daughter’s reunion after many years, and the shed or unshed tears, is repetitive and tiresome for airports in this world of separations. My son arrives from Boston. After years, the family is gathered together. As much as we still love each other, have we not become strangers to one another?

I show the lake to my daughter. At home and among family, we call her Baran. The same name that the Public Register’s office did not give us permission for. I look for the swans. The little rascals are not there.

I am hopeful that I can keep her in Germany for at least one year; perhaps there will be another possibility for her to go to the US. If this happens, perhaps it will put an end to the anonymous letters that tell me if I do what I am planning to do, they will rape my daughter in Iran.

The swans show up. Can I tell them, in front of my daughter, that it is hard, harder than hard, to pretend to be strong and steadfast in Berlin, too?

And every morning, just as all the mornings of the past years and years, I have no escape from my first wakeful activity of reading Iranian news websites. Bad news, dark news, the stoning of hope ...

I wish Mr. Obama, in his moderate policies toward the Iranian regime, at least knows how to play ping pong as well as Mr. Nixon did vis-à-vis China ...

I take Baran to see the Brandenburg Gate, and then I show her the laughable line that remains of the cryable Berlin Wall. And later, the pieces of chewing gum stuck on a few souvenir sections of the wall. But I do not tell her that, in contrast to this, no one has dared stick gum on Arthur C. Clark and Stanley Kubrik's piece of stone.

And again, fascinated, I ask the "Der Rufer" statue, "Do you, too, shout in your sleep?"

And Baran's visa will not be renewed after three months.

It did not rain that much in Berlin this year. And my Baran leaves. And once again, I am cloudy.

But there are emotions that one cannot share with anyone, cannot walk them away, cannot forget them in the middle of a party. This is why some people turn to writing stories. And after each story is finished, they still feel that those emotions have remained unsaid, and again the yearning to write another story besets them. The writer hauls a story's rock to the hilltop. The rock does not roll down. He sets it down right there on the top. And he returns to carry another rock on his shoulder. All writers are like this; the only thing that differs is the height of their hills. For some, their hills have thorns.

It was thus that I rediscovered the solitude of writing. And I knew that Wiko, too, had become a home for me. I chose a cozy corner to write in, I grew accustomed to it, and then writing wildly began.

It meant working seven or eight hours, day and night, more at night. In a thank-you letter to friends at Wiko, I wrote that as a symbol of my gratitude, I would offer them a love story with a bright ending. Not a juvenile Hollywood ending, but one that would at least have a small opening to light. But it seems I have no escape from my dark stories. And, still, I try to cheer myself up: when you write about darkness's Heart of Darkness, it is in fact as if you are hinting at brightness's empty place.

Then, forget about a spirited love story. I start a new novel. It is as black as tar and drenched in blood. I have about five months in Berlin. Can I finish it?

Consequently: Trip to Amsterdam, cancelled, trip to Auschwitz, cancelled, trip to Prague, cancelled ... And:

It would not let me reach for it, to strangle it. I was wearing gloves, but it tore through them and with its beak bit into the soft skin between two of my fingers. The old, bald, tattletale parrot was constantly repeating my name. The last time I had seen it, it had constantly repeated the name of its wretched, dead owner. The man had probably taught it my name so that there

would be a witness to his death. To distract myself from the stabbing pain, which felt as if the wound of an Indian dagger doused in poison had caused it, I looked over at the hell-bound corpse of the parrot's owner. It was in the middle of the room and the rug was lapping up the lacquer-red color of his blood.

And the parrot had made my hand bleed. I tried to use a wire from my forever-present guitar, to throw the loop of the metal thread around its neck and, with pleasure, to yank the two ends. But, as if it were dancing, the motherfucker was swaying its head left and right, and ducking. I thought I saw a sarcastic smirk in the corners of its old, flaking beak. Just like its owner. And it kept repeating my name, more and more clearly each time ...

There was no tub in the bathroom of the apartment; otherwise, I would have thrown its cage into hot water. And I would have looked to see whether bubbles float out of parrots' beaks, too, when they are being boiled.

... The two crimson patches on its wings and the red ring around its neck gave me a divine inspiration. I drew my Mauzer and put its barrel between two of the cage bars. Curious, it came forward and tasted it. I wasted a bullet in its mouth. And bloody green feathers were in the air, falling to the floor, one of them landed on my sleeve ...

I hope Wiko, which provided nine months of brightness for me, will forgive the darkness of this novel.

Translated from Persian by Sara Khalili